

TESTIMONY TO THE LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION
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Q. What efforts are underway in Los Angeles to ensure children in foster care have the care, nurturing and services they need to be successful?

A. Our primary goal for the foster care system is to keep as many children in their family homes safely as possible. Secondly, it is to keep as many children in their community of origin as possible, so that they remain in familiar schools, churches and other institutions. In my observation children who are removed from family homes and communities to distant foster homes present in later years, when they return to their original neighborhoods, with an inability to trust and to bond. A third goal is to find children in dependency a permanent placement where they can grow up, protected from the pressures of constantly being moved around to various placements.

Q. How will be the public know when the foster care system is working appropriately?

A. In my view the foster care system will be working correctly when the concept behind the Family to Family program, as envisioned by the Casey Foundation – which would rehabilitated and even “parent” the neglectful or abusive parent of a child in dependency – is made general policy, so that a productive paradigm for family living can be established for children in dependency.

Q. What outcomes do you think the public should expect for children and families served by the foster care system, and how should the public best be informed of these outcomes?

A. I think it is a big mistake NOT to involve the public. Many times there is wide media coverage of individual crises and tragedies, with little or no attention paid to positive outcomes.

It is important to have the public “own” this problem, as many public support groups have formed over other social and environmental issues. The care of children in dependency is a vital quality of life issue. Somehow we must make the system more transparent, while still respecting the need for confidentiality of the parent(s) and children involved.

Currently the system is hampered in many ways by its opaqueness to a public that might demonstrate interest, concern and resources if there were not informational barriers that have resulted from State and Federal laws put in place in a well-meaning effort to preserve privacy. Unfortunately, the efforts to preserve

privacy have resulted in what some have seen as a cult of secrecy. Certainly, the media have often perceived this to be the case, resulting in hostility to the system. The whole story of the true needs of dependent children is, therefore, never really made available to members of the public who depend on the media for their information and perceptions about society.

Q. Please share with the Commission your thoughts on the progress that L.A. County has made in recent years, and what challenges remain to be addressed.

A. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has made a lot of progress in becoming more focused on the true interests of dependent children. It has implemented a number of programs, including Family to Family; family group decision-making; and Family Preservation, to name a few.

However, one major problem is that the needs of the largest urban areas (such as Los Angeles County) are of a different magnitude, and, therefore, often of a different quality, than the needs of much smaller non-urban and suburban counties. Unfortunately, the state has tended to treat all counties in the same way, using the same formulas for finance and organization for all. I would like to see a more specific effort by the state to collaborate more with large urban counties, rather than trying to impose a one-size-fits-all policy.

For example, the state has mandated that relative caregivers go through a licensing process to meet statewide standards for space and facilities. This results in a situation where a relative caregiver might be required to provide more bedrooms or more bathrooms for the care of multiple related children. Unfortunately, this doesn't take into account the serious shortage of affordable housing in Los Angeles County, with the result that a willing grandmother might be forced to forego caring for her grandchild or grandchildren, and see them sent to foster homes in distant areas. If the state is determined to impose arbitrary standards, it should make provisions to fund them.

Q. What are the most pressing challenges that continue to face children and families involved with the foster care system in Los Angeles, and how do you think they might be addressed?

A. For one thing, a large percentage of dependent children need early mental health intervention. The state has artificial barriers to funding for EPSDT, and makes the process of re-imbursement so arduous that DCFS is often unable to access mental health services. L.A. County is lagging behind counties in other states in the provision of mental health services, and this is unacceptable. L.A. County already has gang and other social and criminal ills of major proportions, and much of it is due to lack of needed social services such as early mental health intervention for children in dependency.

Q. What's the role of the L.A. County Children's Commission, and is it effective?

A. I would like to see the Children's Commission focus on the search for good adoptive homes, educating the public about the role and needs of the foster care system, and raising funds for such things as extracurricular programs for children in dependency, such as homework academies and quinceanera events.

The Children's Commission could do in-depth reviews of specific programs or policies – perhaps analogous to Grand Jury reports. It would be most helpful if the Commission would make recommendations to the County Board of Supervisors based on an annual work plan that would be agreed upon with the Board of Supervisors at the beginning of each year. The current far-reaching efforts by the Commission make serving such an arduous task that it is difficult to find working people with the time and resources it takes to dedicate to an over-broad scope of issues. The work tends to fall on a very small subset of dedicated individuals. It would be my preference to get more hearts, minds and voices involved in addressing the issues that the County must face regarding foster care.